

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Randy Duncan, Matthew J. Smith and Paul Levitz, *The Power of Comics* (Bloomsbury, 2014, 2nd edition)

The strength of this work lies in the ambitious scope of both its breadth and depth. The authors make assumptions that the reader is interested and motivated to work to fill the knowledge gaps that a critical work of this magnitude entails (382 pages not counting the glossary or extensive bibliography). Comic book creators, readers and critics will all find some, if not all, portions of this book a rewarding read. Having said that, the form of the book clearly signals that a primary audience is students (high school and early undergraduate. Three main units – History, Form, Culture – are broken into chapters. In turn, each chapter is bookended by objectives at the start and with discussion questions, activities, readings and scholarly sources at the end. While there is an early assumption that readers may be unfamiliar with media theory (in the introduction the word ‘medium’ is defined), the later chapters don’t shy away from more complex ideas such as the comprehension and creation of hermeneutic images. This traversal from basic foundations through to higher-level critical and practical considerations, and the variety of possible types of analyses introduced, creates an interesting trajectory that offers something new to readers both new and experienced.

Although they first appeared in the US in the early 1930s, there has been a resurgence of interest in the comic book (comic) form since the 1980s. Key works such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*; Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons and John Higgins’s influential collaboration on *The Watchmen*, and Frank Miller’s *A Dark Knight Returns* were on the shelves by late 1986. These works played a major part in sparking ongoing momentum in the creation, consumption, critical analysis and acceptance of comics as an interesting and serious medium. The simplicity of line in comics deftly disguises the complexity of combining word and image to create sophisticated messages. *The Power of Comics* is a very useful adjunct to existing texts exploring the practical creation and comprehension of works with intertwining textual and visual narratives within a largely US/western focus.

Unit 1 starts with a detailed three-part history of the comic form. Covering the history of the medium from multiple angles, the first chapters display provide useful grounding knowledge with sufficient depth to allow for the inclusion of details that many other critical books lack. The authors explore both large and independent publishing models, including their impact on both the content and form. They go on to put comics and comic publishing in their social and cultural contexts. Illustrations of the works under discussion underpin the written history. Graphic Novels and Manga are included in the final historical section, as their influence on visual storytelling practices continues to inform and expand in complexity. Webcomics and transmedia storytelling also get a brief introduction, as the history sections of the book propel the reader through time into Unit 2, which focuses on various aspects of the form of comics.

This broad term ‘form’ moves through Unit 2’s chapters on story creation and types of narrative interspersed with practical considerations such as the use of panels and gutters for encapsulation and flow. Basic semiotics, film theory and art theory are brought in as useful lenses for the enhancement of the comprehension and discussion of comics.

The application of these concepts lends itself to using this book as a tool not just for the examination of comics but also for any media where images are used consciously in a complex interplay between the symbolic and illustrative. I used a chapter for a university group that is focussing on the creation of 2D animation. The reading facilitated a lively discussion that bounced

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between, on the one hand, intellectual and critical analysis, and, on the other hand, practical questions such as 'how should I create this story beat'.

Unit 2 moves through story to discussions of genre and types of classification. Underpinning this is a discussion of audience and consumption in addition to the practicalities of production. These threads appear in all three units, and they are part of what tie together this work. Genre also allows for an expansion of history into the realm of pop culture and a focus on superheroes. Memoirs form the core of the final chapter in Unit 2. This discussion explores concepts of identity, depiction of historical events from a personal perspective and pictorial embodiment. The use of *Maus* to close this unit ties it back neatly to the early history section. In the memoir chapter, I was keenly aware that I was reading a textbook. Nonetheless, the form of the book allows the reader to move through, or skip sections, without damaging the enjoyment or understanding of the rest of the book. This flexibility demonstrates a very conscious structuring of the book.

Unit 3 offers a discussion of the business of current comic culture. Production, exhibition, market forces, publishing paradigms are all efficiently considered, albeit in a largely US context. Modern audience considerations such as fan and participatory cultures, the depiction of women, and a small section on comic culture in a more global context round out the unit and the book. Comic books are an American artform, and this book contextualises itself around the US and western history and markets. That said, there are some sections and references throughout the book to other forms and to international contexts, and the book concludes with a discussion of cultural imperialism and questions of identity. While international contextualization is not at the core of the content, the authors do not ignore it.

The Power of Comics is a text that lends itself to browsing; it is a useful addition to any shelf where visual narrative and comic theory are kept for quick reference.

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